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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a need exists, especially in urban universities, to focus on attitudes toward foreign language learning (in this case, the learning of English) and toward speakers of the language being learned as well as the cultures represented by its speakers. The concept of interculturality as a goal for learning challenges negative attitudes students may have that can potentially block them from having such a goal. It is further argued that achieving degrees of interculturality in foreign language learning is heavily influenced by the emotional dimension of the social setting of the learners' attitudinal postures toward languages and cultures. Answers about how to begin to assist foreign language teachers with the negative attitudes they encounter toward the learning of English and the strong feelings associated with it as a lingua franca cannot be forthcoming until interculturality is defined in the context of foreign language learning and considered a viable goal for those students who have little or no attraction for learning about sociocultural aspects related to English or its speakers. (Contains 27 references.) (KFT)

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Interculturality in an Urban Setting

Universitarios in a large urban setting in Mexico who study foreign languages do so at a university language center and while they form a small percentage of the total university population are a representative group from various academic fields. The entire university complex includes several hundred thousand students in a campus spread over many hectares of eucalyptus fields in the city. Professors and researchers have their offices and departments in buildings many of which are covered with mosaics depicting historical, social and cultural themes of the Mexican people. This urban campus is open from early morning hours until late at night. No student dormitories exist.

Universitarios take language courses at times when they are not taking required courses for their degree programs. They come to a foreign language center for various reasons: some out of interest, selecting exotic languages such as Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Mayan or Nahuatl; some because they need to pass a reading comprehension exam required for their faculty; others because fluency in English as a lingua franca will advance them academically and professionally. This is not to say that some English students do not come out of curiosity and interest in experiencing a new language.

The urban *universitario* experiences a wide range of feelings toward English as a foreign language and what he is learning about the cultures represented by its speakers. Some attitudes are positive, but many are negative especially when the culture of North Americans speakers is involved. These attitudes are an ingredient in the success of linguistic acquisition.

Politically, *universitarios* are active and demonstrate power in their maneuvering with university administration over issues of student rights and social structure. For the past 10 months, for instance, students have taken over the university "*en huelga*", creating a social movement for change in the structuring and functioning of the university.

In this discussion I will argue that a need exists, especially in urban universities, to focus on attitudes toward foreign language learning and toward speakers of the language being learned as well as the cultures represented by its speakers. The concept of interculturality as a goal for learning challenges negative

attitudes student have that can potentially block them from developing such a goal. I would like to take the position is that achieving degrees of interculturality in foreign langauge learning is heavily influenced by the emotional dimension of the social setting and the learners' attitudinal postures toward languages and cultures. Furthermore, answers as to how to begin to assist foreign language teachers with negative attitudes they encounter toward the learning of English, and the strong feelings associated with it as a *lingua franca*, cannot be forthcoming until interculturality is defined in the context of foreign language learning and considered a viable goal for those students who have little or no attraction for learning about sociocultural aspects related to English or its speakers.

Interculturality:

To begin with let us consider what interculturality means and its international context. Byram and Zarate (1997) state that one is intercultural when one is acting in an intercultural manner. To act interculturally is to bring into relationship two or more cultures including those of nation states and of foreign/modern language learning. One of the outcomes of this experience is the ability to see how different cultures relate to each other in terms of similarity and differences.

Interculturality is often associated with living abroad programs. In the European context, academic school programs include a year abroad living with a family. Students come into contact with the familiar and unfamiliar where personal and nation-state identities are challenged and change is inherent. It is in this context where the student is immersed in another language and culture that interculturality can begin. The intercultural speaker, according to Byram is "someone who crosses frontiers and who to some extent develops a competence that has at its center of concern the experience of otherness engaging the familiar and the unfamiliar through the medium of a language" (1997, 3). Instead of assuming that the native speaker is a model or authority to be imitated when one is acquiring new cultural along with linguistic competence or a new language, Byram explains that the intercultural speaker functions as a mediator who understands the relationship between his own language and cultures and interacts with the new language and cultures.

Byram and Zarate (1997) also distinguish between the intercultural speaker and the bilingual one. They point out that bilingualism involves a number of social identities, while interculturality resides in the degree of willingness to try something new rather than cling to the familiar. Interculturality calls upon the individual to exhibit an openness toward discovering perspectives of the familiar and unfamiliar in one's own culture base and that of others. The strength of interculturality resides

in the degree of willingness to try something new. The teacher, according to Byram (1999) becomes a mediator as two or more cultures are brought into a relationship, often drawing attention to the relationship between their own language, linguistic varieties, the foreign language being learned and social group cultures.

The Council of Europe and its Modern Language Project (1989-1996) supported the educational goal of developing interculturality in such a way that the sociocultural dimension of learning a language does not mean abandoning one's own cultural identity in order to acquire that of native speakers of the foreign language. Rather than "decentering" oneself, a person is viewed as being part of a dialectical process involving the learner, another language and contact with cultures (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983, in Byram, 1997, 34-35; Musgrove, 1982). This process in multicultural education has been called decentralization (Burtonwood, 1986) when one's own viewpoint or system of values are relativized.

Linguistic and cultural conflicts:

When we consider Mexican *universitarios* and the development of interculturality, strong linguistic and cultural conflict surface. English in Mexico, more than in other Latin American countries, evokes a wide range of postures reflecting profound sociolinguistic and cultural conflicts. Evidence of tension and ambivalence toward the language and its speakers can be found in purist attitudes, the maintenance of political and economic *soberania* (sovernity), and in movements to defend the national language, Spanish (Lara, 1993). During a previous presidential campaign the main opposition candidate boasted publically on one occasion that he neither spoke nor understood English (probably at best a half-truth). Indeed, languages attitudes are often contradictory, combining in a complex manner aspects of positive identification and rejection, national consciousness and self-deprecation (Francis & Ryan, 1998).

English stands out in the national setting because it is a *lingua franca*, that is, it is a common language used internationally by Mexican speakers of different language backgrounds (both Spanish and indigenous). In professional, academic and social contexts urban and rural Mexicans find the forces of globalization of English intrusive, penetrating their lives. Concern over linguistic/cultural dominance from the outside political scene that such globalization represents draws attention to the forces of dominance in the everyday life of a person (Charaudeau, Gómez de Maz, Zaslavsky & Chabrol, 1992; Zarate, 1999).

When *universitarios* talk about the value of learning English as a *lingua franca,* they recognize that interest is a strong force directed toward the rapid

acquisition of a language if other factors are positive. Teachers, as well as students, recognize that English is often perceived of as an imposed language. One teacher in our ethnographic data highlighted the power of linguistic and cultural penetration represented by English:

> I have my own opinions of why they are taking English. I tell them there's a lot of cultural imperialism: US and UK. Most come to _____(name of institution) because of cultural imperialism *la llave del exito* (key to success). What keeps them here is that it's so ingrained. There is a conflict: I need to study English and I dislike Americans.
>
> Here at _____(name of institution) students see English as political penetration and I think many of the students I've had here would like to learn English without learning the culture. Most students have an idea they can learn English just for instrumental use (Ryan, 1994).

Another teacher noticed that students want to separate culture from language:

> When asked to learn other things that can be more identified with the culture of the people, students usually reacted against it. I heard some students say, "I don't want to know that. I don't want to know whether in the U.S. you have to be punctual or not. I just want to speak English".

Feelings such as these of perceived language imposition have been found in a number of our ethnographic studies (Chasan & Ryan, 1995; Chasan, Mallén & Ryan, 19 ; Ryan, Byer & Mestre, 1998), reflecting the significant role of beliefs (Ryan, 1999b).

Universitarios say they feel a tension when they talk about having their culture in contact with other cultures through foreign language study. Some mention how proud they are having a flag, a past, traditions, a nation and a language. Others comment on how good they feel when watching a group of foreigners enjoying a ride on a *trajinera* (a boat) through the channels of Xochimilco while listening to Mariachi bands. Yet, while they say they are open to other cultures, some acknowledge wearing a "protective shield" as their home culture is threatened by new ways of seeing the world other cultures bring. They were concerned about losing their national pride ("Why do people want me to

change what I have now, what I am proud of?" "Do I have to change?" "If I am seeing the world through a different set of eyes, where does my original point of view go?) (Ryan, Byer & Mestre, 1998). Moreover, they become defensive about losing their culture ("Don't touch my culture!" "Don't teach culture!" "Learning not losing!) Their words echo their desire to protect themselves against outside threats. Such expressions can be grouped around a scale of views from defensive to non-defensive as Figure 1 represents:

Defensive:	Neutral:	Non-defensive
Don't touch my culture	Learning about culture is a help but not necessary.	I would be interested in studying cultural aspects.
Don't teach culture.	Culture is not indispensable but useful.	I would like a little more about the U.S. in my English classes.
We don't allow culture to be imposed.		

Figure 1: Student discourse: defensive/neutral/non-defensive (adapted from Ryan, Byer & Mestre, 1998).

When surveyed about what they react to most negatively about the United States, the great majority point first to United States intervention in foreign countries and in the daily life of Mexicans, second to attitudes of North Americans toward Mexicans, and third to attitudes toward Mexicans working in the United States (Chasan & Ryan, 1995; Ryan, 1998; 1999b). Various juxtapositions are present: Mexico and the United States, latinos and anglos, Spanish and English.

Strong negative attitudes toward North Americans appeared in qualitative data as well as feelings of ambivalence toward the language and toward the culture of North Americans. One way in which these attitudes surfaced was in stereotypes that were observed in research with Mexican and Canadian (Quebecois) foreign language students; that is, Mexican students of French and German and Canadian students of Spanish (Gómez de Mas & Ryan, 1999). Mexicans were talked about by Quebecois as being "warm, cheerful, hospitable, emphatic, poor". Canadians were referred to by Mexicans as being "friendly, cultured, calm people, hard workers." A major difference between the two groups, however, was that when the Mexicans talked about by Canadians they contrasted them with North Americans, saying North Americans are "not friendly, not cultured, racists, imperialists, people of few values". Canadians did not mention North Americans in their descriptions of Mexicans. Figure 2 shows this phenomenon in second research findings:

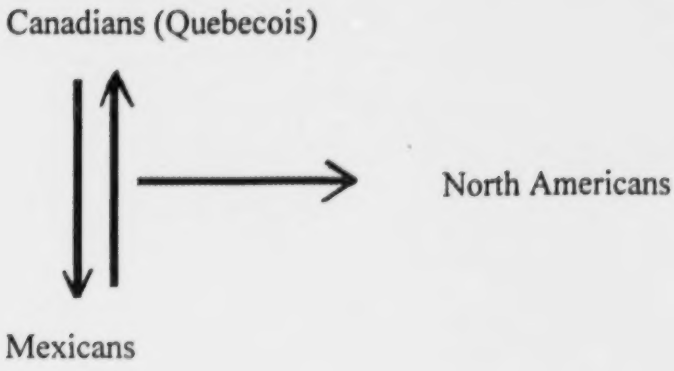

Figure 2: Mexican, Canadian and North American stereotypes (Gómez de Mas & Ryan, 1999).

Social identity theory suggests that oversimplified mental images (stereotypes) create "in groups" and "out groups" out of a need to enhance the positively-valued distinctness of the "in groups" compared with the "out groups". Social judgeability theory focuses on the social contexts of judgements and finds that they account for what is stereotyped and in what ways (Leyens, Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1994; Tajfel, 1978; 1981; Turner & Tajfel, 1986). These theories, especially Social Judgeability Theory, speak to the ways of guarding identity through categorizations that directly simplify characteristics of "in group" people and that appear indirectly when comparisons are made with more compatible groups such as observed in Figure 2 when Mexicans talk about Canadians.

The Intercultural Person

Let us return now to the second part of the position presented in the beginning of this discussion, namely that to begin to introduce interculturality calls for the desire to break through negative attitudes that can impede the gradual acquiring of a state of being that projects into all life experiences. It is ambitious to consider the classroom experience as the time or place when such a goal could realistically be started, while the experience of a year living abroad in a exchange program provides a rich, ample setting for rapidly advancing toward such a goal. What happens, however, when such experience is not available or possible? In foreign language learning interculturality goals gradually move a person along a route that has classroom experiences which stimulate student interest in looking at the unfamiliar and contrasts cultures bring with them.

Beyond defining interculturality in terms of close cultural contact in different social settings (or experiences living abroad), we can also seek to define it in ways more closely tied to the context of foreign language classroom experiences. The visibility of interculturality is always apparent with students living abroad. The elephants stand out as Byram says--it is always easy to recognize an "elephant" when you see one in a crowd. Intercultural people stand out like elephants for their skill as mediators, their mode of acting, and ability to manage social identities. To define interculturality further in the context of the foreign language learner means defining it more cognitively. We might say that the intercultural person is one who has developed a state of being or way of dealing with the world that serves to meet the challenge of experiencing the unfamiliar of cultures through whatever means it develops.

Teachers and Interculturality

This discussion has referred to the dimension of emotions, attitudes directed toward certain speakers and their political and social identities, and has touched on phenomena that appear in much research with monolinguals, bilinguals and multilinguals. It remains, however, to try to understand to what extent global goals can be adopted for the urban Latin American *universitario*. One could say: "Should foreign language programs aim for interculturality when students have the right to say 'yes' or 'no' to such goals directing their learning.?" Some students have personal goals that enable them to use English for professional needs or instrumental purposes. In this case, interculturality becomes rather remote or secondary since they may not perceive of interculturality as their primary reason for acquiring a language. They may maintain this position until years later in life when they become attracted to the serviceability of English. Moreover, life experience involving contact with other cultures that could develop interculturality may not occur during the time the student is at the university, but rather at some later date.

However, if we accept interculturality as a goal, we are left with the question of how teachers and students can be involved in developing it even though negative attitudes may reflect tension over having pedagogical activities based in North American culture. However, if we take the position that experiences can lead to some degree of interculturality, several possibilities emerge.

First, teachers project their interculturality through their identities. Students through interaction with teachers are in contact with someone who exhibits a way of acting, as Byram and Zarate point out. If they endorse intercultural communicative competence as an ability that grows out of interest, the skills of discovery and

relating, of exploring and learning about other cultures increase with time and intensity, leading to an international identity. Included in Byram and Zarate's list of skills of intercultural communicative competence is "critical cultural awareness". It is suggested as a way of exploring views that interfere with the "willingness and openness" essential to competencies modeled for distinctive purposes (See Byram, 1997; vanEk, 1986). Identifying attitudes is one precondition. They do not necessarily need to be positive or negative if one accepts a critical position that enables him or her to relativize oneself and one's culture.

Second, literary texts project significant aspects of intercultural understanding. Bredella (1999) points out that such texts require openness of mind and a willingness to look at them from different perspectives, basic goals of interculturality pointed out earlier in this discussion by Byram and Zarate. Bredella cautions that criticism of the foreign culture in such a manner might estrange students from the foreign culture and possibly reinforce ethnocentricism. Moreover, the reader's personal involvement with the literary text and its structure leads to reflection on this involvement, an essential presupposition for tolerance.

Third, teachers and student from multi-disciplines such as drama, literature, music, geography and history can be combined with those of foreign language learning (Bredella, 1999; Byram, 1999; Fleming, 1999; Nichols, 1998, 1999). As has been attempted in the UK and the Czech Republic, multi-disciplinary international projects with postgraduate students combine pairs from such disciplines; for instance, geographers were paired with modern linguists to work on the theme of contrasting forms and functions of the environment, and geographers were paired with English literature trainees to explore the inter-relationship between landscape and literature in the UK and the Czech Republic. Nichols has argued that an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about the environment provided the opportunity to study language teaching and the significance of the cultural context of both countries. He reports on the value of this project as contributing to the cultural dimension of language teaching, to developing cultural awareness. The project introduced teachers themselves to another culture and developed teacher consciousness of teaching strategies which engage students with another culture and with how people of this culture see the students' own country. Nichols studied the perceptions of the paired groups as the project progressed. The teacher trainees in the UK and the Czech Republic, perceiving how each other's subject matter is taught, advanced their interculturality.

These are three possibilities that add to one's interculturality. More thought and research is necessary to explore further innovative ways of increasing

interculturality through developing a critical attitude toward one's own culture and outside cultures. In situations where negative attitudes toward specific English speakers emerge, interculturality may become one way to overcome some of the tension.

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